

Book Review

Book Title: *Course in General Linguistics*

Author: **Ferdinand De Saussure**

Translated by **Wade Baskin**

Date of Publication: 1974 (Date of First Publication: 1916)

Language: English (Original Language: French)

Publisher: Fontana/Collins

Source of the Book: JDV Library, Pune (Acc.No.59698, Class No. 410 SAU/C)

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For the accreditation of B.Ph. program

August, 2018

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Book Review

Course in General Linguistics

1. Introduction

Course in General Linguistics written by Ferdinand de Saussure is considered as one of the trustable scientific work on linguistics. No linguistic class begins the course without quoting Saussure. He is a Swiss Linguist. He is one of the founders of 20th century Western linguistics. It is my interest in linguistics what made me to choose this book. This book is actually a collection of lectures taken by Saussure and those lectures are compiled in the book format by his students. This book primarily contains a systematic approach to the scientific study of language. Language is primary when compared with speech. Speech is only a helper of language. Saussure is a structuralist linguist who gives importance to the structure of language. He interprets language as a system of signs. It is what the structure of a language give meaning. That is the reason why even when a language becomes unfamiliar to the present generation, those languages can be learned with the help of its linguistic features. It is how Saussure proceeds with the presentation of the ideas.

This book is generally divided into five parts - **Part One** : *General Principles*, **Part Two** : *Synchronic Linguistics*, **Part Three** : *Diachronic Linguistics*, **Part Four** : *Geographical Linguistics* and **Part Five** : *Concerning Retrospective Linguistics*. This book is opened with an introduction and Appendix. All these chapters are summarized in this book review.

2. About the Author

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was born on 26th November 1857 in Geneva, Switzerland (See **Figure 1**)¹. He is a well-known linguist. He is the founder of the modern linguistics. His findings and revolutionary thoughts contributed to in the field of linguistics in the 20th century. His epoch making work was published in 1916. He was a Sanskrit scholar too. Therefore Sanskrit linguistic theories may have influenced his findings in

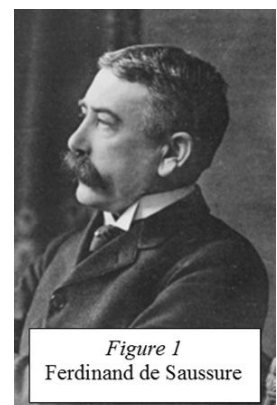


Figure 1
Ferdinand de Saussure

¹ This photo is taken from Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ferdinand_de_Saussure_by_Jullien.png

linguistics. He westernized many of the Sanskrit linguistic terms and introduced in the western classes². The introduction of the two elements of *sign* has their roots in Sanskrit. His influence made to divide the history of structuralist linguistic theory into *Pre Saussurean*, *Saussurean* and *Post Saussurean*. Ferdinand de Saussure is the founder of modern linguistics. He died in 1913.

3. Context of Writing

Ferdinand de Saussure is the founder of modern linguistics.³ Even after his death, Saussure is still alive through his masterpiece *Course in General Linguistics*, which was got published only in 1916. This treasure was reconstructed and published from his students' notes. This work consists of the explanations in the field of linguistics. The entire content of this book is the class room lectures taken by Saussure. It is Jonathan Culler who gave introduction to this fourth edition of the book.

4. Summary

Saussure has given clear cut distinction between the following pairs of linguistic terms such as between *langue* and *parole*; between *the synchronic* and *the diachronic* study of language; between *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* language units and so on.⁴ All the chapters are summarized in the following pages.

4.1. Introduction

The introductory section of *Course in General Linguistics* consists of seven chapters. The first chapter gives an overview of the history of linguistics. The first chapter gives an outline of the history of linguistics from classical period to modern period. It also gives proper explanation to the separation of linguistics from *Philology*. The second chapter introduces the subject matter (all manifestations of human speech) and scope (to describe and trace the history of all observable language and to determine the general structure of language) of linguistics and its relation with

² Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) received his doctorate from the University of Leipzig in 1880 and lectured on ancient and modern languages in Paris until 1891. He then taught Sanskrit and Indo-European languages at the University of Geneva until the end of his life. <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/course-in-general-linguistics/9780231157261>

³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, (Bungay: Fontana/Collins, 1974), xi.

⁴ Ibid.

other branches of science.⁵ The next chapter pulls out the objects of linguistics. The difference between the linguistics of language and linguistics of speech is discussed in the fourth chapter. He says that both these fields are interdependent. But their interdependence does not prevent their being two absolutely distinct things.⁶ The fifth chapter describes the internal and external elements of language. The following chapter gives a graphic representation of language. Here the Saussurean IPA is introduced.⁷ He also gives the discrepancy between writing and pronunciation in the same chapter. Later in the seventh chapter, he introduces phonology. According to Saussure the physiology of sound is known as phonetics.⁸ By this he encapsulates the introductory section.

4.2. Appendix

Appendix of *Course in General Linguistics* gives the principles of phonology. There are two chapters in this section; Chapter 1. *Phonological Species* and Chapter 2. *Phonemes in the Spoken Chain*. The first chapter begins with the definition of the phoneme and the chapter is developed further with the systematic presentation of the origin and manipulation of speech sounds along with its categorization.⁹ The second chapter tells us about the need of studying sounds in the spoken chain.

4.3. Part One : General Principles

The first part entitled, “General Linguistics” which consists of three chapters, is an attempt to draw out few general principles applicable for all languages. It is here he introduces the concept *sign* and its features. The first chapter of part one gives the nature of the linguistic sign.¹⁰ The linguistic sign is the two-sided

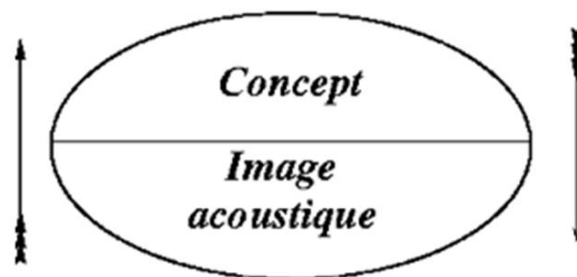


Figure 2
Linguistic Sign

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰ Ibid., 65.

psychological entity that can be represented by the drawing: (See Figure 2).¹¹ The ‘concept’ is known as the *signified* and the ‘sound image’ is known as *signifier*. The relations between these two elements are arbitrary in nature. The arbitrary nature of sign is explained well with apt examples by him. According to him a linguistic sign is a link between concept and sound pattern. *“A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern [image acoustique—of course we now know that we must extend this to graphematic marks as well—any repeatable image might become a signifier]. The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer’s psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his senses.”*¹² He finds not substantial evidence of relation between *signifier* and *signified*. He also doubts whether there is only a chain of signifiers. Even then onomatopoeic formations stood against the latter statement. These types of words transcend the boundaries of different languages spoken in different cultures. These two elements create a linguistic sign. According to him sign is the base of any language. It is vital to understand and to scrutinize its abstract nature. His linguistic theories give indications to *Sphota* theory of Bhartṛhari too. The second chapter is about the immutability and mutability of sign. Multiple signs are required in forming a language. Therefore language is a system of many sub-systems. The final chapter deals with static and evolutionary linguistics. Diachronic and synchronic laws are introduced here.¹³ *Synchronic linguistics will be concerned with the logical and psychological relations that bind together coexisting terms and form a system in the collective mind of speakers. Whereas Diachronic linguistics studies relations that bind together successive terms not perceived by the collective mind but substituted for each other without forming a system.*¹⁴ He also introduces the concepts *langue* and *parole* in this book. *Parole* is the French word for “speech” and *Langue* for “language.” *Langue* is a set of particular rules of language. No utterance is possible without *langue*, because it facilitates the structure, whereas *parole* is individual utterances.

¹¹ Ibid.,66.

¹² Ibid.,66.

¹³ Ibid.,91.

¹⁴ Ibid., 99-100.

4.4. Part Two : Synchronic Linguistics

Saussure gives special attention to synchronic linguistics in the second part of *Course in General Linguistics*. Diachronic linguistics studies the change of language in terms of time, whereas synchronic linguistics aims at reconstructing the system as a functioning whole. This division enabled the growth of systematic linguistics. There are eight chapters in the second part. These chapters deal with the topics such as generalities, the concrete entities of language, identities, realities, values, mechanisms of language and so on. Value is only one element of the process of signification. There is kind of interdependence of terms in linguistics. Therefore value is based on the other as in the case of length (question on Short? Or Long?). In other words, value is depended on the other linguistic terms.

4.5. Part Three : Diachronic Linguistics

Phonetic change, grammatical consequences of phonetic evolution, analogy, folk etymology, diachronic units and so on are some of the topics discussed in the third part which consists of eight chapters.¹⁵ Diachronic linguistics studies the change of language in terms of time, whereas synchronic linguistics aims at reconstructing the system as a functioning whole. This division enabled the growth of systematic linguistics.

4.6. Part Four : Geographical Linguistics

The fourth part of the book entitled, 'Geographical Linguistics' describes the diversity of language. This part also deals with the complications of geographical diversity too. There are four chapters in this part. Saussure points out the influence of geographical diversity in the diversity of language.¹⁶ He presents time as the basic cause of diversity.

4.7. Part Five : Concerning Retrospective Linguistics

There are five chapters in the last part of *Course in General Linguistics*. He concludes his entire course on linguistics by stating the fundamental idea of this course, "*the true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself.*"¹⁷ Here he explores and describe how language

¹⁵ Ibid.,140-189.

¹⁶ Ibid.,197.

¹⁷ Ibid.,232.

has contributed to anthropology and prehistory. He also tries to introduce language families in the last chapter of this part.

5. Quotations

1. Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual. It never requires premeditation, and reflection enters in only for the purpose of classification.¹⁸
2. Language is a system of signs, which express ideas.¹⁹
3. The concrete object of linguistic science is the social product deposited in the brain of each individual, i.e. language.²⁰
4. Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first.²¹
5. Linguistic sign is then two-sided psychological entity.²²
6. The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary.²³
7. One of the first consequences of the phonetic phenomenon is the breaking of the grammatical bond that unites two or more terms.²⁴
8. Synchronic linguistics has only the perspective of speakers and, consequently, only one method; diachronic linguistics, however, requires both a prospective and retrospective viewpoint.²⁵
9. The literary language adds to the undeserved importance of writing.²⁶
10. Spelling always lags behind pronunciation.²⁷
11. The content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but what exists outside it.²⁸

¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁹ Ibid., 16.

²⁰ Ibid., 23.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 66.

²³ Ibid., 67.

²⁴ Ibid., 153.

²⁵ Ibid., 212.

²⁶ Ibid., 25.

²⁷ Ibid., 28.

²⁸ Ibid., 114.

6. Appreciation and Critical Comment

The book *Course in General Linguistics* by Saussure has produced a systematic account of linguistic history along with structural explanation of language. He tried to analyze language through all possible means of his time. The inclusion of the findings of Broca is an apt example of the latter statement. He included even neurological findings of language in his studies. He proved that linguistics has scope even in physiology. He gives a hint to neuro-linguistics by explaining that language is not what is heard outside, but its neurological foundation. According to him the arbitrariness of language will be enough to state that language is abstract. The acceptance of sign itself is enough to prove that it is concrete. Both linguistic sign and its psychological impression have an indefinable bond in terms of association and dissociation. Therefore a linguistic sign consists of both concept and sound image. Following are some of the criticisms.

1. The arbitrary nature of sign is explained well with apt examples by him. He finds not substantial evidence of relation between *signifier* and *signified*. He also doubts whether there is only a chain of signifiers. Even then onomatopoeic formations stood against the latter statement. These types of words transcend the boundaries of different languages spoken in different cultures, but those words are expressed differently in each culture. If then these words are also the product of the culture. Therefore is it justifiable to state that onomatopoeic words are natural? This question is not discussed well in *Course in General Linguistics*.
2. The issue discussed above (see point no 1) is applicable in the case of interjections too.
3. The real existence of *signified* is not discussed well. The book remains a doubt whether sign is only a *signifier*.

7. Conclusion

Course in General Linguistics is a good scientific work and it gives a step by step introduction to linguistics from different perspective. It is true that language is form and not substance in itself. Language cannot be seen, because it has its origin in brain. In the introduction given to the first English translation of the *Course in General Linguistics* by Jonathan Culler states that Saussure

is a contemporary of Sigmund Freud and Emile Durkheim, and therefore Culler could identify Saussure with the prominent forerunners in the systematic and methodological expansion of the social sciences.²⁹ According to him sign is the base of any language. It is vital to understand and to scrutinize its abstract nature. His linguistic theories give indications to *Sphota* theory of Bhrathari too. Diachronic linguistics studies the change of language in terms of time, whereas synchronic linguistics aims at reconstructing the system as a functioning whole. This division enabled the growth of systematic linguistics. I felt it is a good book for those who wish to do linguistics.

8. Bibliography

Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Basingstoke: Fontana/Collins, 1974.

Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ferdinand_de_Saussure_by_Jullien.png

Review of *Course in General Linguistics* by Columbia University.
<https://cup.columbia.edu/book/course-in-general-linguistics/9780231157261>

²⁹ *These three thinkers not only shared an ability to orient themselves in a mass of disparate facts and to see where and how a suitable object of study might be defined; they shared a sense of the nature of social phenomena [there's that word again!-jwp], the importance of certain questions, and the inadequacy of previous attempts at explanation.* (Ibid., xi.)